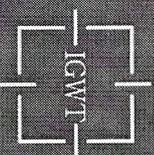


**Achieving Commodity & Service Excellence
in the Age of Digital Convergence**

Proceedings
Volume I

The 16th Symposium of IGWT



**Achieving Commodity
& Service Excellence
in the Age of Digital Convergence**

Proceedings Volume I



International Society of
Commodity Science and Technology



Korean Academy of
Commodity Science and Technology



THE UNIVERSITY
OF SUWON

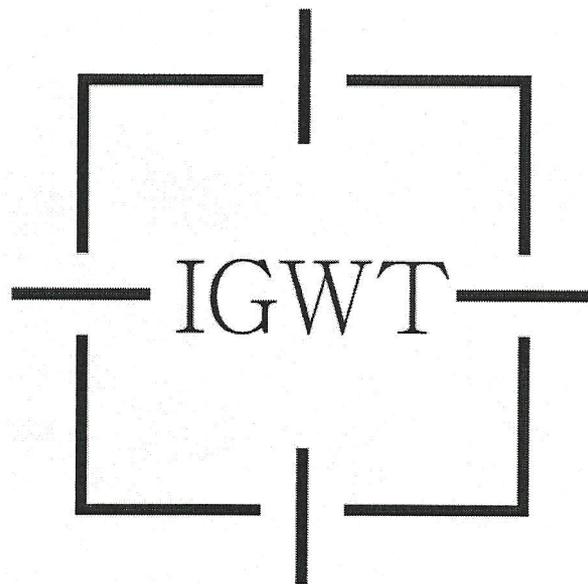
August 18 - 22, 2008, Suwon, Korea

The 16th IGWT Symposium

**Achieving Commodity & Service Excellence
in the Age of Digital Convergence**

Proceedings

VOLUME I



**August 18 - 22, 2008
Suwon, Korea**

The Editorial Board

Co-Editors in Chief

Professor	Yong-Hak Lee, Ph.D.	The University of Suwon
Professor	Hojung Shin, Ph.D.	Korea University

Associate Editors

Professor	Byeong-Yong Kim, Ph.D.	The University of Suwon
Professor	Daeki Kim, Ph.D.	Korea University
Professor	Sun-Chul Kim, Ph.D.	The Suwon Science College
Professor	June-Hee Na, Ph.D.	Chungju National University
Professor	Hyoung-Soon Kim, Ph.D.	Pai Chai University
Professor	In-Sun Yoo, Ph.D.	The University of Suwon
Professor	Hae-Kyung Yu, Ph.D.	University of Incheon

All articles published in these Proceedings were selected by the Editorial Board after reviewing by the specialists in the field. The articles are published in the authors' version without editors' proofreading.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TO ORGANIC AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS IN BULGARIA AND ROMANIA

Vassileva E., Ivanova D.

University of National and World Economy – Sofia, Department of Commodity science,
Studentski grad "Hristo Botev", 1700 Sofia, BULGARIA,
elkav@unwe.acad.bg; danielai@unwe.acad.bg

Botezat E., Tomescu A.

University of Oradea, Management and Marketing Chair, Faculty of Economics,
Management and Marketing Chair, Str. Armatiei Romane nr. 5, 410087, Oradea, Romania,
rectorat@uoradea.ro; atomescu@uoradea.ro

The aim of the paper is to describe the perceptions and attitudes to organic products of a particular set of potential consumers in Bulgaria and Romania. Quality analysis according to the method of "focus groups" was used. The results obtained from the four focus groups conducted in Bulgaria and the two focus groups in Romania during the period April-May 2007 were analysed. Within this comparative study the different associations which potential consumers in Bulgaria and Romania have for organic foods come to the fore. The willingness of participants in the focus groups to pay a higher price for organic foods, related to the greater added value due to their ecological method of production and healthy effect is discussed. It was established that the groups of organic foods preferred by the Bulgarian and Romanian participants in the focus groups are one and the same. The insignificant differences are due to the eating habits in the two countries. All respondents, irrespective of their nationality confirm the necessity for a special label for organic products. The reasons for this are: facilitating customer's choice; differentiation from other products (easy recognition and identification); information to consumers; guarantee for the organic origin and quality of the foods; information and promotion of organic foods.

Keywords: Organic Foods, Consumers' Perceptions, Bulgaria, Romania

Introduction

Organic production, as part of sustainable agriculture, is based on methods preserving the environment – it supports and develops ecosystems including biological cycles and soil fertility, utilizes most advantageously the local natural resources. Methods which minimize air, soil and water pollution are implemented in organic agriculture thus shunning the use of synthetic chemical products, genetically modified organisms, etc. [1, 2]. Livestock breeding follows methods close to the natural way of life of the animals, which secures their good health. Often defined by the equivalent terms "biological", "ecological" or "organic", this agricultural production is based on a series of strict rules and prohibitions, supported by appropriate mechanisms of certification and control.

The general tendency for most of the Central and East European countries is their organic production to develop primarily for export purposes. This makes it impossible for these products to adapt to the local market and their prices become too high for these countries. The solution is in the development of the home market of organic agricultural products and foods [3, 4]. The development and success of organic market in the Central and East European countries depends primarily on the perception of this kind of products by consumers. The authors of the present study turn their attention to a comparative study of potential consumers in Bulgaria and Romania.

The aim of the paper is to describe the perceptions and attitudes to organic agricultural products of a particular set of potential consumers in Bulgaria and Romania.

Methods

The "focus group" method is considered as one of the most suitable methods of obtaining empirical information. Research of this type is applied in the area of consumer behaviour on the market. The advantages of the method are the unique chance for establishing an adequate contact with the representatives of the interested parties.

Residents of the big cities (Sofia and Plovdiv) and cities with long-lasting ecological problems (Pernik) in Bulgaria and the cities - Oradea and Constanța in Romania were included in the survey. Six focus groups were organised during the period April - May 2007 in Bulgaria and Romania. The six sessions were held in identical manner following a preliminary developed procedure. During the all six sessions, without exception, audio and video records were made as well as a detailed name list of all the participants. The survey in each focus group had different duration but chronologically conformed to the following stages: informing the participants about the aims of the survey; filling in demographic data by the participants in the session in specially developed questionnaires; conducting a discussion on specific questions about the surveyed area asked by the moderator of the session.

During the discussions the participants in the focus groups were offered certified organic teas and coffee.

Description of Participants

The participants in the focus groups represent the whole range of potential consumers of organic products in Bulgaria and Romania, established in our previous surveys [5 - 7]. All participants are active, working people with an income above the average for the country and with a good level of education. A total of 41 people participated in the Bulgarian focus groups (11 men and 30 women). 97.56 % of them have university education. The majority of the participants (36.59 %) were between 21 - 30 years old, 19.51 % - between 31 - 40 years old, 29.27 % - between 41 - 50 years old and 14.63 % - between 51 - 60 years old. A total of 22 people participated in the Romanian groups (11 men and 11 women) and 81.82 % of them were between 31 and 50 years old, 9.09 % - were between 51 and 60 years old and 9.09 % were under 30 years. All of the respondents in Romania have university education.

Results and Discussion

The majority of the survey participants in Bulgaria define organic foods as "ecologically clean products", produced "by a natural method or as naturally grown foods", which do not contain harmful to health ingredients (nitrates, preservatives, etc.). Certain nostalgia for home-grown foods is felt among consumers and they recognize organic ones as such since they stand out with their appearance and taste. Almost all surveyed Romanians associate organic products with their specific method of production prohibiting the use of artificial fertilizers, pesticide, herbicides, genetically modified products, hormones and antibiotics for animals. They define them as grown in "ecologically clean areas" with monitored quality and tractability "from the farm to the table". Respondents in these two countries associate organic foods predominantly with healthy lifestyle.

Bulgarian and Romanian consumers who participated in the survey are aware of the fact that they pay more for products with greater added value due to their ecological method of production and healthy effect (Table 1). It is noticeable that for every second respondent who answered in the Romanian focus group the price of such products is irrelevant. The solution is to look for a balance between covering the costs of producers and the price, which the consumer is ready to pay.

Table 1. Willingness of Participants in the Focus Groups to Pay a Higher Price for Organic Foods in Bulgaria and Romania.

Price they are ready to pay	Number of respondents		Relative number of respondents, %	
	Bulgaria	Romania	Bulgaria	Romania
The same as for a conventional product, but not higher	-	-	-	-
Up to 10 % higher	5	3	12.20	13.64

Up to 20 % higher	7	1	17.07	4.54
Up to 30 % higher	4	3	9.75	13.64
More than 30 % higher	11	4	26.83	18.18
Price is irrelevant	11	11	26.83	50.00
No answer	3	-	7.32	-
Total	41	22	100.00	100.00

Preferred groups of organic foods by the Bulgarian participants in the focus groups are: milk and dairy products (25 %); meat and meat products (24 %); fruits and vegetables (23 %). Cereals and products obtained from their processing, children's foods, herbs, coffee and tea do not take such prominent positions in the representation of consumer preferences in Bulgaria (Fig. 1). The top position of milk and dairy products in the list is explained both by their central role in the eating habits of Bulgarian people as well as by the belief in their importance to health. This is confirmed by opinions such as: "because it is consumed everyday" or "due to their high quality and benefit for the body". Organic products are perceived by consumers as having in a considerable degree attributes beneficial to health (they are free from "remnant pesticides in fruits and vegetables, too much nitrates, hormones and antibiotics in the meat and milk").

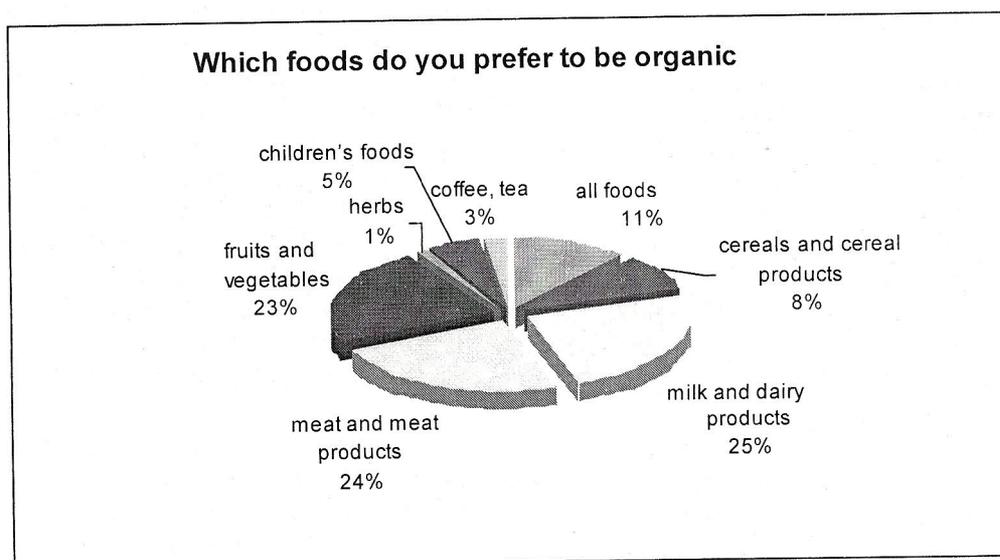


Figure 1. Preferred Groups of Foods by the Participants in the Focus Groups in Bulgaria. Romanian respondents say that they would buy dairy products (77 %), fruits and vegetables (45 %), meat products (41 %), and bread and pastry products (23 %) (Fig. 2).

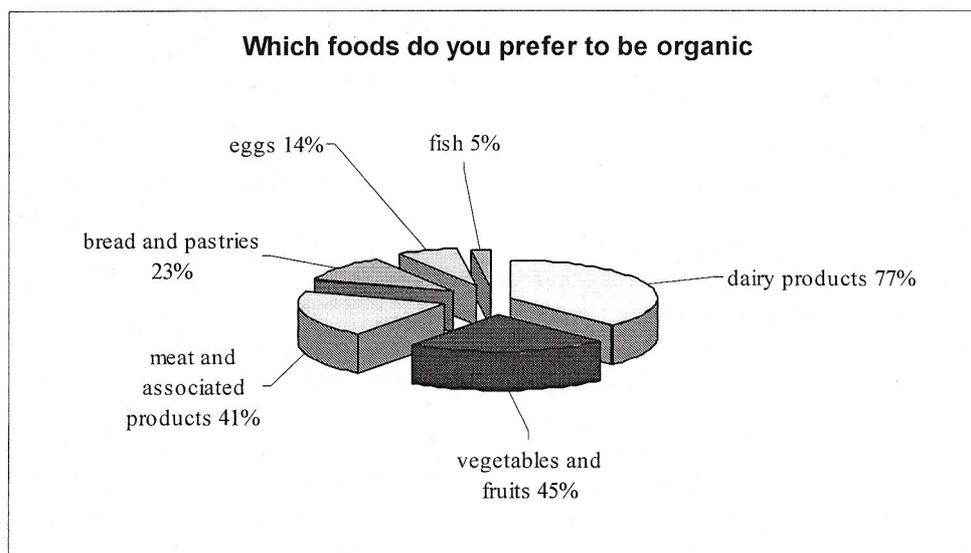


Figure 2. Preferred groups of foods by the participants in the focus groups in Romania.

All respondents confirm the necessity for a special label for organic products. The reasons for this are: facilitating customer's choice; differentiation from other products (easy recognition and identification); information to consumers; guarantee for the organic origin and quality of the foods; information and promotion of organic foods. The majority of consumers reply that they look for a special marking (sign) on the label, which gives information about organic foodstuffs. Some Bulgarian respondents express again their doubts in the legitimacy of these signs and give an example of the speculative use of the term "product from ecologically clean region". According to Romanian respondents the sign should be easily recognisable i.e. "should be seen at a glance", properly protected to avoid "any unscrupulous producer to take advantage of it". It should be launched on the market and create trust among consumers and its appropriate application should also be controlled.

Conclusion

The results of the survey in the two East European countries, newly accessed members of the European Union, do not show significant differences in the perceptions and attitudes to organic products of potential consumers.

Both Bulgarians and Romanians who participated in the focused groups perceive organic agricultural products as "clean" foods, which do not contain harmful to health chemical ingredients and are produced "by a natural method or as naturally grown foods".

Consumers who participated in the comparative survey are aware of the fact that they pay more for products with greater added value due to their ecological method of production and healthy effect.

Participants from both countries confirm unanimously the role of the eco-label as an efficient tool of distinguishing organic products from the rest on the market as well as a tool of building up trust in organic agriculture.

All this necessitates the implementation of suitable national programmes of consumer training about organic production and the attributes of organic foods. The creation of appropriate consumer attitudes to organic agricultural products will facilitate the development of local organic markets in Bulgaria and Romania.

References

- [1] Organic agriculture, environment and food security, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Environment and Natural Resources Service, Edited by Nadia El-Hage Scialabba and Caroline Hattam, Rome, 2002.
- [2] Karov S., P. Paraskova, Organic Agriculture - Clean Nature, Healthy Foods, Food processing and industry magazine, 2003, 3, 9 - 13

- [3] Willer H., M. Youssefi, *The World of Organic Agriculture - Statistics and Emerging Trends*, IFOAM&FiBL, 2007
- [4] *Focus on Central and Eastern Europe, Reports on Organic Agriculture Worldwide*, Organic Agriculture, IFOAM, 2003
- [5] Kojuharov H., E. Vassileva, D. Ivanova, *The Bulgarian Organic Product - An Element of the Integration Process to European Community*, University of Global and National Economy, Ed. Stopanstvo, Sofia, 2004
- [6] Ivanova D., E. Vassileva, *Organic Foods Trade - a Criterion for Ecological Culture and the Challenges Bulgaria Faces*, *Journal of Global Business&Trade*, 2005, 1 (1), 65 - 73
- [7] Roman G., M. Toader, *Organic Agriculture - a Chance for Food Availability in Romania*, *International Conference on Organic Agriculture and Food Security*, 3 - 5 May 2007, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), ITALY

Acknowledgements

The financial support provided by National Science Fund and Ministry of Education and Science (Joint Research Project "MARKET POSSIBILITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PRODUCTS (ORGANIC AGRICULTURE) IN BULGARIA AND ROMANIA") is gratefully acknowledged.